

The Comedy Kid

BY ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

With a Tendency to Fist and Footwork Faster Than His Headwork

CORRY ROAD was on the other side of the railroad tracks. The least undesirable section of Corry road was farthest from the tracks. No. 1-A Corry road was so near the right of way that its occupants could tell in their sleep whether the 12:37 was burning hard coal or soft. In No. 1-A Corry road was born Roderick Vicalpine Dhu Kent.

His father was Essex English and his mother was Chicago Yankee. But his mother had received as a wedding gift from the family for whom she worked an ornate and flaringly illustrated copy of "The Lady of the Lake."

Much of it she did not understand, but she thrilled to the soul at one of its full-page illustrations—the drawing of a darkly magnificent and powerful man with a brandished sword and a scowling brow. The pictured man, she learned from caption and context, was Roderick Vicalpine Dhu, often referred to during the rhymed narrative course as Roderick Dhu. Wherefore, when a lustily squalling son arrived in the Kent household, his mother had him christened Roderick Vicalpine Dhu Kent. She had her way in the naming of the child, and the child, this because her husband was barred, temporarily, from objecting. While following too zealously the example of the stag at eve, he had mistaken a policeman's uniform for a brackish and had made a dash for it with its wearer. By reason of which he did not return from the house of correction until a fortnight after the christening.

Never from the hour of his baptism was the heir of the house of Kent called by his full name. He grew up as "Roddy."

On Corry road children did most of their own upbringing. Those who had no knack for doing so died. Roddy lived.

Both his parents died before he was ten. St. Thaddeus' orphanage took him in.

Then eight years with adoptive parents gave Roddy a smattering of education and of manners. He managed to get through grammar school at sixteen, thanks to extra coaching, and he was not dropped from high school until after the end of the first term.

First and last, books were meaningless to him. He could read alone did he excel. As an all-round athlete he had not his equal within two years of his own age.

Old Justin, the former pugilist, who had charge of the high school gymnasium and from the start as a horse-maniac might regard some future Derby winner. He insisted on teaching the stocky and pug-nosed lad to box and to wrestle, and he all but went with joy at Kent's progress.

Two years later Justin received a visit after hours from Roddy.

"I've left home," reported the youth. "I mean it's left me. The old gentleman died last month. They've figured out his estate. He'd lost a lot. There's just enough left to keep the old lady going. If I stayed on there'd be only a meal and a half a day for each of us and about half enough money for everything else she's got to have. So I've lit out. I figured she'd feel better that way—I know—thinking I was making a get-away from a sinking ship—than if she thought I was going hungry out in the tall grass so she can get three squares. I wrote a rotten note and I skipped. Gimme a job, won't you, or try to get me some somewhere?"

It was a long speech for the taciturn Roddy Kent. And Justin let pass a longer interval of silence before he answered.

"At any line of work that's in with your home raising," said he, "you'd be worth about a cents a week in United States money."

He paused. Roddy's heavy little eyes did not flinch. The heavy young face was impassive.

"Just the same," pursued Justin, "you done a good thing when you did off the raft that wasn't big enough to hold you and the old dame. And you done a decent thing when you left her sore at you instead of sad for you. I'm giving you credit for that."

The boy frowned, making as though to interrupt. But old Justin went on: "There's only one man's size job you could make good at. I'm talking about the ring."

"I know you are," assented Roddy. "I know you are going to. Can you get me a start?"

"I can," promised Justin. "So could any one else whose opinion the fight crowd will split. I'll do a bit more. I'll train you myself and I'll manage you on a 25 per cent split—you being only a kid and a dub yet—and I'll board you at my shack and train you there."

Three months later the first semi-final event of the Cestus Athletic Club's Saturday night program was scheduled for the round bout between Coal Mine Crump and Kid Kent. Both were welter-weights—one a veteran pork-and-beaner, the other a novice.

Crump was a former mine hand, who had some slight following among the sportsmen of his old trade, but among a fair contingent of local fight fans. He barely escaped being a formidable fighter.

Justin had been criticized for starting his protégé's career against so experienced a third-rater. But the old man had studied the situation and had made his choice.

"Here's the idea, Roddy," he had said. "If you're the come-I think you are, you're able right now to last out against Crump or maybe even get a shade on him. Hit the first punch and keep on hitting. Be ready to keep on tearing in. Be ready in the going. When you hear it get up with a jump and make for him, slug as soon as you get in reach. No matter if he ain't half up off his chair yet—slug! Fight's on as soon as the gong sounds. Remember that."

NATURALLY, it did not occur to Justin to mention that a preliminary gong sometimes is sounded before a bout, the gong which calls the bath-robed fighters to midring to get their instructions from the referee, after which they retire to their corners, there to strip and await the gong which begins the bout.

It seemed as needless for the man of many years' ring experience to explain this to his disciples as for a school teacher to tell his pupils they need not translate the printer's name and the date on a Greek examination paper. To Justin, as to all of his kind, the term "gong" meant only the bell which opened and closed a round.

The second preliminary at the Cestus Athletic Club on Roddy's debut night was ending as Roddy Kent sat beside Justin in an empty ring-side box swathed in his bath robe and watched the feather-weight slapping match drag itself to a close. Then, at Justin's command, he climbed up into one of the ring's newly vacated corners. Not a handclap greeted him. Novices and unknowns and dark horses were no novelty to that crowd. Instead of growing nervous at the wait, he fell to rehearsing Justin's myriad wise instructions and warnings. This done, his gaze roved again over the sprinkling of on-lookers below and above the ring, and came to a brief and puzzled rest upon two women who sat in the second row behind the boxes. To be accurate, it was merely the younger of the two.

She was a girl of about his own age, well set up, neat, capable-looking. Comely with youth's freshness but with no claim to classic beauty. She was sitting beside a woman perhaps ten years her senior—a woman of evident and almost aggressive respectability.

Kent recognized the girl at once, though the recognition sent no thrill through him. She was Mary Bonnell, who had gone to high school with him. The two had never been overwell acquainted with each other. Indeed, they might never have met had not Roddy chosen to thrash a trackside lad whom he caught snowballing her on the way to school. But soon thereafter Kent had left high school and the acquaintance had lapsed.

Nor did he waste a second thought on her now, except to wonder vaguely why nice girls should go to prize fights. Their eyes met. Mary bowed slightly without smiling. Roddy ducked his head in response.

Then he forgot her existence, for there arose a scattered ripple of handclapping. Coal Mine Crump was advancing toward the ring amid his seconds and handlers.

Crump was perhaps thirty-two years old. Always he had been a fighter since a handy way with his fists had lifted him out of the mines and into the ring. But somehow he did not altogether qualify.

There were vague tales afloat about Crump—rumors that he had a real fear for unprovoked fouling and for selling fight and for taking money at precisely the moment when certain heavy backers of his opponent had prophesied he would. Nothing was proved, but he seemed to be semi-prophetic, and a condition not common to a pork-and-beaner of his limited chances.

UP through the ropes now Coal Mine Crump made his lazy way. He glanced around the house. He caught sight of Mary Bonnell and the woman with her. He grinned at them. Mary Bonnell's hand gaily in reply. The older woman smiled maternally. Crump turned from them, bobbed his head in recognition of the mild applause, sneered chillingly at the interested Roddy, then sat down in place in his corner.

The two sets of gloves were inspected and drawn on. Ensued a moment's pause while the referee strode majestically to midring. He signaled the timekeeper to strike the hand-gong which should call the fighters to him for instructions. The referee, who flashed, just as Crump was rising gracefully from his stool.

An instant later Kent's piston-like left fist was crashing into the wholly unexpected jaw of the newly arisen Crump.

Roddy was obeying old Justin's orders to the letter. At the clang of the gong he had gone violently into action. Similarly he had hit the first blow. But he would not follow the advice to "keep on knocking on better than nothing left to tear into."

Crump, hands at sides, was taking his first forward step toward the beckoning referee as Kent's first blow crashed into his jaw. Past the referee's flying momentary it had all Roddy's 140-pound and whalebone muscle behind it.

Coal Mine Crump shot backward as from a mule kick. Clean through the ropes he tumbled and fell, spreading awkward the prize table. The entire audience was on its feet, yelling, gesticulating, milling. Seconds and handlers piled into the ring. The dumfounded Roddy stared about him, wondering at the insanity caused by his initial punch as a professional fighter. He had a fleeting glimpse of Mary Bonnell, standing with clenched hands and widely incredulous eyes, and of the older woman fairly jumping to the ends of the continent.

Referee and seconds and Justin had hemmed him in and his ears were deafened by a babel of undistinguishable language.

Out of the ruck of it presently he glanced that he was assailed right furiously for what he had done. And he babbled to the scandalized Justin: "You told me to! You said to sail in at the sound of the gong and to land the first punch. I—"

The clamor broke over fresh on his excuse. The announcer advanced to the ropes and waved both arms to the racking spectators.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he bawled. "Kid Kent's manager told him to start hitting as soon as he heard the gong. He didn't say which gong. The Kid never even saw a fight before. So when the prelin gong sounded he got busy. That's how it happened."

Anger-reddened faces twisted into laughter. From all over the house came a ragged guffaw of appreciation.

NEXT morning on the front page—not on the sporting page, mind you—appeared a story whose gist the Associated Press had already sent to the ends of the continent.

"Son," he exulted, "it's the making of you! That yarn will be in the mouth of every fight fan in the state. I'll do more to make you known and make folks come to see you fight than the biggest lump of luck that a beginner ever run into. A fool for luck, like the feller said. I'll go down and have a chat with 'em as soon as

they're awake enough to have read their papers."

He did. He came home at noon glorified.

"Talk about luck!" he crowed. "They near kissed me. Whatcha think? You're to be signed up to meet Alabaster Mayo, four weeks from last night! Get that! Alabaster Mayo. The coon that's in line to meet the water champ of the middle west. And you've got a fight on with him! Luck! Of course the matchmaker chap thinks it's a set-up for the coon. He counts on the newspaper dope to bring out a crowd to see you. You pack the wallop. Why, everybody I met has read about last night! But I seem to be the only one who saw all you put into that smash you landed on him. Hand Alabaster a few of those and you'll cut through to that yellow streak I've always said he has."

When Roddy Kent came home from his afternoon's road work that day he avoided the livelier streets. He dreaded to meet any friend. In spite of this or because of it, he faced a corner to find himself surrounded by a crowd of the poor-relation category. For he arranged his afternoon road work to end always in precisely the same place and at the same time. His luck did the rest.

Not being gifted with anything approaching self-analysis, he did not stop to consider why he was going out of his way to meet and walk with a girl who had been out of his life and out of his mind so long a time. All he knew was that he had come upon her, by accident, that first afternoon and at an hour when he was troubled and ashamed and bitterly lonely and a newspaper laughingly stock, and that something had happened to his heart as he had stood there looking confusedly down into her grave eyes.

Mary did not encourage these frequent meetings. Indeed, between their encounters she used to tell herself she must find some way to avoid the homely and stupid youth. But, somehow, to her own self-disgust, she could not think of any deft or kindly method of stopping the queer acquaintance. Then, to her amazement, she found she did not want to stop it. So it went on.

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It was a shining-eyed Mary Bonnell who greeted Roddy at the corner of her home street next afternoon. She had even been guilty of waiting there for him. Sheepishly he received her congratulations. And as they fell into step as usual, neither noticed that they were strolling away from the Crump bungalow instead of toward it. They were actually taking a walk together; their first.

As, finally, they turned back, a little of the light died in Mary's dark eyes. "Harry is ever so happy," she confessed to Kent. "He says last night will mean a jammed house when you and he fight. That's all he seems to think about. And the newspapers have gotten hold of that funny thing Mayo said when he wouldn't get up. And Harry says that'll add to your reputation, too, by making people laugh again. But, but suppose you knock Harry out?"

"That's what I'm going to try to do," Roddy assured her; then he gulped as he realized belatedly that he had said the wrong thing again. "But don't you see," she explained, worriedly, "don't you see how horrible that'll be for Sis—looking on and seeing her husband beaten? And—and for me, too?"

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a good gate is likely to help put him on his feet, I should think."

"He sure needs it!" assented Justin. "Lately there's been funny cracks made about him and how he got some of the cash he always used to be flashing. Promoters have been leary of putting him on. Now go to bed. You're due to start training tomorrow for Alabaster Mayo."

If it was something akin to chance that made Roddy encounter Mary Bonnell three times that next week on her way to or from the grocery, then the kinship belonged in the poor-relation category. For he arranged his afternoon road work to end always in precisely the same place and at the same time. His luck did the rest.

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anguish. And then there cropped forth the well hidden yellow streak which Justin had suspected.

Motioning Roddy back, the referee began to count Mayo out. As he did so, he surveyed the fallen man; and he was led to believe that terror rather than inability to rise kept the negro clung to the floor. Wherefore, after counting up to five, the referee addressed Mayo in a quick undertone.

"One-two-three-four-five," he intoned, adding, fiercely, "Aren't you going to light any more?"

"Yassah!" replied the stricken Alabaster as the count proceeded. "Yassah—but not tonight!"

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loses, it'll take more than his share of the purse to pay his debts, and we'll be worse off than we are."

Her voice shook. A note of grief and anxiety ripped its way to Roddy Kent's soul. The pang of it